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Abstract

The objective of this review is to summarize the prevalence of Internet use among the adolescent population and the growing threat of cyberbullying. This manuscript also addresses the difference between cyberbullying and traditional bullying and the negative psychological effects that result from cyberbullying. Important intervention and prevention strategies for parents and school officials are noted as well.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Internet addiction, traditional bullying, electronic

Introduction

In a world of Internet dependency and constantly evolving technology, today's youth are becoming more comfortable with having endless information and instant communication at their fingertips. It is estimated that 93% of adolescents, ages 12 to 17 years, use the Internet and 75% of this population have their own cell phone (1). Twenty-five percent of those having a cell phone use it for social media (2). This group averages 3,364 text messages a month, with girls sending and receiving 2.5 times as many texts as boys on a daily basis (1). Adolescents spend an average of 10 hours a day using various forms of media (3). Even though this access allows an increase in media skills and constant social interaction, there are also negatives to this type of access, one being cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying has been defined as "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text" (4). The concept of cyberbullying has become more popular over the past decade as teens

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continue to use various forms of media to harm others. In the United States, 16.2% of students reported being electronically bullied, either through email, text messages, chats rooms, or social media (5). Surveys have shown that females are twice as likely as boys to be the victim of cyberbullying (5). Conversely, 10% to 20% of adolescents across the world admit to bullying others (3). Studies have shown that somewhere between 33% and 75% of those victims of cyberbullying are also bullied at school (6).

Cyberbullying and traditional bullying are similar in many aspects, seeing as both involve an exchange of hurtful words and or threats from a bully to a victim. The main differences in the two forms of bullying are that cyberbullying allows the bully to remain anonymous, lacks supervision from adults, and victims are extremely accessible at all times, which ultimately results in decreased inhibitions and overall more hurtful exchanges (7). Cyberbullying is somewhat more concerning than traditional bullying because the victims are unable to find a feeling of safety when going home, seeing as media is available at all times and can reach them wherever they go. It is thought that the victims of cyberbullying actually suffer more and have more negative effects due to the lack of escape (8). This form of bullying is rarely punished, seeing as most of the aggressors are anonymous online and law enforcement does not typically intervene in such situations unless there is immediate concern for one's safety (8).

Even though all victims of bullying may experience negative outcomes, research suggests that the effects of cyberbullying may be more severe and have a much greater impact on its victims (3). Overall, self-esteem is lower in these victims compared to non-victims (9). These individuals display many negative psychological issues, including depression, anxiety, anger, and worry (7). Cyberbullying victims typically obtain less sleep and eat less than non-victims (3). Studies show that school performance declines in these students, resulting in a drop in grades, increased absences, poorer concentration, and increased behavior issues while at school (7). Those who are being bullied through electronic means are eight times more likely to carry a weapon to school than those students who experience no bullying (1). Many studies have shown that the

discussed negative effects had a more profound presentation in those students who did not know the identity of their attacker (10). Even though the psychological effects are significant in these victims, there is no physical harm with cyberbullying (11).

Intervention and prevention

With the growing numbers of cyberbullying victims, much attention has been given to intervention and prevention of this problem. Participation in social media sites and willingness to give personal information online are two risk factors for these attacks (12). Studies have suggested that, to prevent children from becoming victims of cyberbullying, parents need to be educated about the types of technologies that are being used by their children, have open discussions with their children about what they do when online, have privacy settings that monitor/shield what their children are able to access, and actually supervise their children while online (3).

Parents are able to do a great deal from home in terms of supervision, but it is important for school officials to get on board with intervention and prevention efforts as well. There is sometimes hesitancy from school officials to get involved in attacks that happen away from school, which only worsens the outcome for the victims (9). Most states now require school officials to intervene when such threats are made aware, as they now have added cyberbullying into anti-bullying policies (6). More research is needed regarding the schools' role in this form of abuse and to clarify the legal responsibility to act in certain situations (10).

Internet addiction is a topic that is currently being studied since the explosion of the Internet and the ease and portability of Internet accessing devices. This controversial addiction, generally defined as spending an excessive amount of time online that results in an interference with daily activities, jobs, and relationships, is a concern for today's youth (13). It is estimated that nearly 9 million Americans fall into the category of Internet addicts, which has become detrimental to one or more aspects of their life (14). Internet addiction is concerning for the overall state of the country due to a decrease in productivity, a decrease in interpersonal relations, and

an increase in negative health effects related to this issue (15).

Research suggests that there may be a relationship between cyberbullying and excessive use of the Internet. For instance, computer proficiency and time spent on-line were related to cyberbullying victimization and offending in an on-line survey of over 1,300 adolescents (8). Raya, Casas, Del Ray, and Ortega examined the connection between cyberbullying and excessive use of the Internet among almost 900 students, and found that excessive Internet use predicated cyberbully victimization (17). In a survey that included 177 seventh graders, the students who used computers more frequently were more likely to bully others on-line. However, no relationship was found between the frequency of using computers and being a victim of cyberbullying in this sample (16). Features that are associated with Narcissistic Personality Disorder have been suggested to underlie these maladaptive behaviors (18).

Another potential underlying variable is depressive symptomatology. Youth who report depressive symptomatology are more likely to be the victim of harassment on the Internet than their counterparts with mild or no symptomatology (19). In addition, mood disorders are related to excessive Internet use (20). Symptoms of depression may increase the vulnerability to excessive use of the Internet and involvement in cyberbullying victimization and/or perpetration. Alternatively, cyberbullying victimization and/or perpetration and excessive use of the Internet may result in depressive symptomatology. Additional research is needed to identify the direction of casualty, and further explore these and other possible mechanisms underlying these constructs.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying is a growing problem among adolescents due to their exposure and access to the Internet and cell phones. The negative effects that result in such bullying can result in severe psychological distress, increasing the rates of depression, substance abuse, legal trouble, and suicide among the adolescent population. It is important for parents, school officials, and health care providers to develop better ways of educating students about safe electronic interactions and activities, detecting the threat/risk of cyberbullying, and helping those at risk combat such attacks.

Our access to constantly evolving technology is a great benefit to all aspects of today's world, but much more emphasis is needed in using this plethora of information and instant access to benefit one's overall self and to become more productive members of society. The Internet provides adolescents with many opportunities and benefits. The Internet's popularity and ubiquitous nature may also lead to pitfalls, such as cyberbullying and excessive use of the Internet. These drawbacks present researchers, clinicians, and policymakers with unique challenges. Whereas the results of research thus far have provided valuable information about these issues, additional research is needed to further describe and explain them, their relationship with each other, as well as their unique correlates, predictors, and features. Ideally, the product of these investigations will yield additional information about the extent to which these constructs are related, which in turn may lead to the development of effective interventions.

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